

Governor McNair Oral History Project
South Carolina Department of Archives and History

Interview

with

Robert E. McNair

Interviewer:

Cole Blease Graham

Date:

September 20, 1983

CBG: This is Tape 29, Side 1, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair as a part of the McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Today's date is September 20, 1983. Governor, we've been talking in detail about the events at State College in Orangeburg, and perhaps it might be good to talk about some general topics in relation to those events now. What is your feeling about the accuracy of the press reporting generally about the various stages of events at Orangeburg?

REM: Well, I think you have to acknowledge that the reporting was generally good and accurate. Most of the reports were coming directly from there. Most of the press that was there had good access. It wasn't a situation where they couldn't themselves wander around and roam around. People were available to talk to them. So I think generally it was good. You know, they, like everybody else, didn't have the opportunity of hindsight themselves and perhaps wouldn't always know all of the details surrounding something or some incident of some kind that might happen, but I think generally it was good.

CBG: Were there any specific events that you felt the press may have helped your effort to manage?

REM: I really am not sure. You know, if you think back and could recollect all of the things that took place, I'm sure you'd find incidents where you would say, "I wish you had known more about that . . ."

CBG: Yes.

REM: . . . so that you might have handled it better" or "I wish you had rethought it before you blew it out of proportion."

CBG: Yes.

REM: Everything was so delicate, and it was so difficult to keep things on an even keel and to keep some little tiny thing from blowing up and causing a big problem. We would always caution the press, as we did everybody else, to be careful. "Don't do something that'll stir it up. We have enough problem keeping it calm and keeping it under control as it is." And I'm sure there were instances that I really don't recollect at this time where something may have occurred and the press may have blown it out of proportion or may have put a wrong interpretation on it that could have or did cause some, but generally, as we've said over and over, there was a feeling from day to day that there was a cooling and a calming and optimism that we were somehow getting the thing under control, when the eruption took place.

CBG: What do you think generally about the accuracy of information coming to the governor?

REM: Well, again, we felt we were getting fairly good information. I don't say that everything we got was accurate. I don't think we were getting any misinformation by design or anything of that nature. I think people that were giving us the information were giving it to us as they saw it and being as honest as they could under the circumstances. The reason I say that is I was getting information from so many different places and sources and so many sides of the issue. It wasn't that I was isolated and getting it only from one source.

We had communications with people who were involved in different ways. I think I'd mentioned before I'd get information from John Cauthen who was getting it himself from different sources than I was. I've tried to think of the name of the young black who represented Modjeska Simkins. He was down there on the scene. I was getting information from him. He would call in. I was getting it from the administration of the college itself. I was getting it from Reverend [I. DeQuincey] Newman and the NAACP leaders. I was getting it from some of those who were in opposition to the NAACP, as far as playing for influence there, and getting it from [J. Preston] Pete Strom, getting it from my own staff, getting it from the newspaper people who were calling. So it really was a flow of information from all sources, and by and large it was pretty accurate.

Even reflecting back we were getting fairly good information as to the atmosphere on the campus and what was going on in the community. We knew what was happening in all of the meetings in the community because we were represented and trying to help mediate, trying to help solve, trying to help resolve the problems that existed, to get things back to normal as best we could. We were talking with the mayor, we were talking with city councilmen, we were talking with plain residents of Orangeburg, people like Mr. Rut [Rutledge] Osborne, who was chairman emeritus at the university, and his sons. He had worked hard to improve relations between the college and the city, and they were involved, trying to use their influences and their contacts to ease the pressure and to calm the waters down there.

CBG: A general characteristic of all of these information sources is that they were all trying as hard and honestly and openly as they could to calm the situation down there.

REM: I really think there was a strong effort on the part of people to calm it. There was just a relatively few of, what do you call them, radicals, hotheads, whatever you want to call them--they're in every crowd--but there were relatively few of those on the campus.

CBG: Yes.

REM: They were fairly isolated, and it was just a miniscule percentage of the students that were still excited to the point of wanting confrontations. None of the people that I know of in Orangeburg, white or black, wanted to see any kind of confrontation, and so most of them were working to calm it. That was pretty general.

CBG: That raises an interesting thought. We've talked so much about the black-white problem and the racial implications of Orangeburg. Is there any basis to characterize it as a town and gown problem?

REM: Probably so, but less than you would have in Columbia with the University of South Carolina.

CBG: Yes.

REM: The racial thing was so prevalent there, and it ran so strong through it all that it really would be hard to push it over into a town and gown situation.

CBG: One other actor that we've also talked about is the FBI. What was their role in providing information?

REM: Well, I go back to when I had taken a position early on that we were going to do the things that had to be done, we were going to try to do it, we didn't want Washington having to come down and do it themselves, and we wanted their cooperation. I think we'd established a good relationship with Washington from the White House right on through the various departments of government, HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare] and the Justice Department, the FBI and all, and we had established through effort a good, open relationship. We had credibility with them. I think they felt that South Carolina was making a good effort; that we were trying to do the best we could and were helpful.

So the FBI was naturally at that time up on everything that was going on, and we had open communications with them. They let us know when any of the so-called trouble makers or any of that radical group in South Carolina were visiting or what they were doing, where they were, so that we'd be alert to it and could know they were here and not get blindsided by somebody coming in and stirring up trouble. They worked very closely with SLED [State Law Enforcement Division]. Chief Strom had through the years established quite a reputation nationally and had worked himself up into the national circles and thus had that kind of relationship. SLED had become known as a first class, professional organization. So I felt -- and I think they shared that--we had good relations, open relations, and when we had anything of major significance like Orangeburg, they were normally there monitoring what was going on, giving information or

sharing information, sharing anything they heard. If anybody was coming in, we knew they were coming. They shared that information. I don't want to say they were giving advice and counsel, but they were because, you know, the head of the FBI office would be with Chief Strom and with the others talking about how you handle the situation, how you deal with this if that arises and all. So the FBI was in Orangeburg and was there through the whole time and had open access to everything we knew, and we felt we had, you know, open access to everything they knew. They were trying as best they could to help us to keep the thing under control and calm it down.

CBG: What has been the course of their report?

REM: It was an unusual thing because, when it all happened, we had been communicating with the Attorney General's Office in Washington through the Attorney General's Office here. We had been talking because it was a big thing, and we were all very afraid it was going to blow and create a real crisis for us. So we were trying to get something down on the bowling alley. We were trying to get the city to open up a little bit and to take a positive position and to do some things to ease the tension there. So all of that was going on, and then this happened and, the FBI being there and having seen what happened around the country, we all knew what the aftermath was going to be. We knew there were going to be cries of police brutality and everything in the world and rightfully so.

So we determined that, since we were in that posture, the best thing we could do would be to get the FBI to conduct a thorough and complete, comprehensive investigation. We called on them, on the government, for that the very next morning. Ramsey Clark himself called to express his concern to me and his willingness to be helpful in any way that he could. "What can we do to help you?" I expressed my displeasure over their not bringing the action, and I think I probably did it in rather strong language to the point that, "If you'd just moved and hadn't dilly dallied and delayed, we might have avoided this, but there needs to be a thorough, complete investigation, and we could like to ask for the FBI to do it," which was all agreeable at that time in total accord. That was the way we thought it should be handled. I didn't think SLED could kind of investigate SLED and the report have the credibility it ought to have; and I didn't think SLED could investigate the highway patrol because SLED was there and was part of it. Had it not been there and not been participating that might have been a different thing all together. But it was pretty difficult for SLED to investigate something that they were involved in when the chief himself was the chief and I mean chief of the whole thing.

CBG: Why do you think the report has still not been made public?

REM: Well, the report never has been made public. The report was completed, as I understand, it was very thorough and comprehensive, and everything was documented to the point that all they ever said was it was completed and “We find nothing that would cause us to bring any charges against anybody.” The general feeling was that their investigation led them to believe that there wasn't anything to bring charges, criminal charges, against the patrolman involved, and I think they generally confirmed what everybody'd been saying about the firing back and forth from the campus and the throwing of the little firebombs and trying to set houses on fire around the perimeter of the campus.

That's where we thought the FBI report would be so helpful. Unfortunately, you know, it's hard to think Ramsey Clark would try to politically exploit something like that, but later years have demonstrated that he saw some political stuff in this as well as in many of the other experiences then, and the FBI would not make public the report. They would never release it and would never release a summary of it and would never make it available, which we thought they should and called on them several times to do. We thought nothing short of that would satisfy people.

That's when we had the judgment decisions to make about inquests, about blue-ribbon panels, and all of that. I didn't see in my judgment where a blue-ribbon panel could really contribute anything to that. I didn't think we ought to call on people, prominent blacks, prominent whites, to come in and put themselves in that position. It would be awfully difficult for any black to serve on a blue-ribbon panel and come out and say, “We don't find anything that would cause us to recommend prosecution or anything of that kind.” So we concluded that a blue-ribbon panel in this instance wasn't good as far as that was concerned. And as far as people getting together and talking about where we go from here, that's where we began to put together a statewide biracial group that went out and helped create biracial commissions in other communities, particularly in the trouble-spot areas of the state. We also did that on a nongovernmental basis because it was my position at that time--in hindsight in second guess somebody else's judgment may have been different--but mine was strongly that if it was governmentally mandated, it wouldn't have credibility at the time. It needed to be sort of a group of prominent people, a biracial group themselves, recognizable people who came together and sort of represented the people, not the government. That's where we encouraged and helped put it together, but it wasn't an official organization or body, and I felt really, as we were going through it, that it wasn't wrong doing it that way and letting them go out and pull together community leaders in a voluntary sort of way so there wasn't a mayor's biracial committee or a governor's biracial committee at that time.

CBG: Did it take a long time for you to realize that the FBI report wasn't going to be released?

REM: Well, it did, and it didn't, too, because as soon as it was completed and we got the reports, I insisted that it be released. I was hit with something that shocked me at the time. "We never release FBI reports or the findings of the FBI." That bothered me. Maybe policies have changed, but just a few weeks ago, I recall seeing in the newspaper something about where the FBI had made an investigation and released a summary of its findings or something of that nature. But I was told then that they would not. We thought that was a terrible decision because it just let the thing fester.

CBG: It's not anything you knew beforehand either.

REM: Right. There wasn't anything prior to that. They had made investigations, I think, in Detroit and some of the other real bad areas, but they were, I suppose, reports for different purposes. There had been people killed in other places, and I'm sure the FBI went in there and made investigations to find out if there were any civil rights violations and all of that, and we really wanted more than just civil rights violations. We wanted a thorough, comprehensive report, and we wanted them to make it public, and the failure to make it public was the thing that created so much trouble. I've never understood it. I did go all the way to the president on it, and the president was very supportive and personally endorsed making the thing public and did have the FBI share the summary, I mean, and go over it. I never actually read it, but they did let me look at it and let me read some of the summary and shared that with me, but I couldn't make it public. I could say and I did say that I'd been up, and I had seen it, but I still demanded that they make it public because, again, my saying what was in it didn't really have the kind of credibility that it should have had.

CBG: What were the avenues of political exploitation a report like this could have been used for?

REM: I don't know. I think it would have probably continued to create a lot of controversy and would have created a lot of discussion. Let's assume the report did say that there was a lot of firing from the campus. There'd be charges that the report was doctored and inaccurate, or if it showed Cleveland Sellers really did actually incite the riot, that he wouldn't let it calm down, and that he did precipitate it and agitate it and push until it was an explosion, it would have created constant controversy. If it had cleared the officers, it would have been a typical rubber stamp . . .

CBG: Yes.

REM: . . . whitewash, as they called them back then, a whitewash, and I suppose they felt that the best thing to do is to say we didn't find anything to cause us to move further to indict anybody or have any criminal

prosecutions and that is a good way to put it to rest, and they'd leave it at that. The inquest thing came with a lot of demands for an inquest, and again it was my strong feeling that--the purpose of an inquest is to simply find out how somebody died, you know.

CBG: It's an old common law . . .

REM: That's right, not to really get into all of the ramifications of it. The thing had happened, we were calming it, I think it shocked everybody into reality and what could happen if you let these things just fester, fester, fester. So my feeling was that an inquest was just going to be like pouring more oil on troubled waters, and it's just going to be a forum for everybody to further excite or incite rather than to serve any good useful purpose. The FBI report had indicated there was no need for prosecutions, so there wasn't anything that could come from an inquest other than just more and more and more and more. My feeling was it ought to calm and quiet and we ought to put the pieces back together and get on about the job that was much more important than the politics of the Orangeburg incident.

CBG: Was there ever any federal action against the patrolmen?

REM: Yes, finally the Justice Department on its own initiative with the Civil Rights Division sent a couple of lawyers down, went to the federal grand jury and had a full disclosure and full hearing with a strong effort to get an indictment, and the grand jury declined and refused to indict on that. So they continued on and finally brought a civil action under some very obscure section of the Civil Rights Act that I wasn't familiar with at the time. So there was a civil action which I, frankly, was glad to see happen. You couldn't say that at the time. Judge [Robert] Martin and I talked about it on the telephone and agreed that it was a good thing, and that the best way to put it to rest was to have a full hearing, and the best thing that could happen would be for it to just go its whole way and let a jury finally decide because if you can't win a civil action you certainly couldn't have prosecuted somebody and won a criminal prosecution. I thought Judge Martin did one fine job of letting it go and letting it run its course. He declined to hear motions to dismiss it or to grant any kind of judgment and all of that and did a good job of presiding. It went all the way through; the jury came in and found for the defendants in the civil action. So, again, we said, that should have calmed that side, and I suppose that was the reason there was no further litigation because everything was there with the government making the presentation and the government lawyers doing it and having access to all the files, all the FBI files and everybody else, that really there was no need to pursue the matter civilly when the government had pursued it in a case that required much less evidence and proof than you would in any other type of action you might have brought.

CBG: A civil action.

REM: A civil action, not a criminal action, brought under an obscure section of the Civil Rights Act. The grand jury refused to indict them after the Justice Department . . .

CBG: I see.

REM: . . . revealed all the information and spent days with the grand jury.

CBG: Yes.

REM: So my feeling was that from that standpoint, the grand jury had heard it all with the Justice Department making the presentation and had refused to indict. A civil federal court jury heard it all and found for the defendants. So it pretty well put to rest the legal aspects of the incident, of the shooting, as far as civil responsibility, of criminal responsibility, and all of that. With all of that put to rest and with the fact that three people were dead and one or two were not even students at State College and were not supposed to be there; and one a teenager who was out there under somebody's encouragement and all when he should have been home with his family; somebody was responsible.

Everything we had leading up to it, everything we had that night, everything we had following suggested the fact that Cleveland Sellers had instigated it and pursued it and advocated it and almost insisted on keeping sort of a possible confrontation alive when everybody else had calmed. The students were in their rooms on the campus behaving themselves and avoiding confrontation and there he was with twenty-five or thirty or whatever he could get together promoting and persisting in having one. The fact was that he had led them into a couple of charges out there when they were sort of trying to see what they could do and led them into setting that house on fire a couple of times, and the direct evidence was that he was there in leading it when he got shot himself. We had a responsibility to prosecute people that we felt had incited a riot and had really caused the death of the three children, or the three youngsters.

CBG: What happened with legal action against Sellers? What course did that take?

REM: Well, that followed local indictment by the local grand jury . . .

CBG: That was in the state courts.

REM: . . . in the state court there. There were a lot of things that went on there that never got into the press and all. There was a strong feeling that we shouldn't try to have a trial in Orangeburg, that it would just be a riot and tear up things. It'd be impossible. I even had some prominent people from Orangeburg come to see me, including a circuit judge, and plead to forget it, drop it. My feeling was we couldn't. If we did, we would then have lost our credibility for the future if anything came like this. So we had to set some policy. We had to establish some precedents, that we weren't going to tolerate these kinds of things, and therefore, my feeling was Cleveland Sellers should be tried, he was going to be tried, and I didn't want to ever see the day in South Carolina when we couldn't have court and we couldn't conduct a court as it ought to be conducted. If you couldn't do that, then, you know . . .

CBG: The machinery of government was at a halt.

REM: I mean, the machinery of government was gone.

CBG: Yes.

END OF SIDE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO

CBG: This is Tape 29, Side 2, an interview with Governor Robert E. McNair as a part of the McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Today's date is September 20, 1983. Governor, we were talking about the matter of Cleveland Sellers and how the possibility loomed that, if nothing was done by way of official action in regard to the allegations against Mr. Sellers, how this might be interpreted in what really was a time of concern about public order and stability.

REM: Well, yes, no question. You recall Jack Nelson had come to South Carolina and had written his editorial report on Orangeburg for the *Los Angeles Times*. It got national and international coverage and became sort of the official report on Orangeburg when, in fact, Jack Nelson wasn't there, never visited Orangeburg, and got his information from one or two sources. In fact, one source was Jack Bass and they later collaborated in a book. It upset me that we had a reporter from Los Angeles who flew into Columbia and went out and wrote an authoritative report on something as sensitive as that was, something that gave South Carolina such a terrible image internationally, that there we were in just a massacre in Orangeburg and that it was just police brutality, with no mention of any of what led up to it or any of the other things that went on there. So we also felt that we had to help clear the air about what really happened down there, and

thus Cleveland Sellers should be tried and needed to be tried and the matter needed to be disposed of there in the courts.

CBG: Did you ever have a chance to either talk with Nelson or follow up on just how it was that the *Los Angeles Times* would take such an interest in this?

REM: Never did. I think it was a period of time when all of them were looking for those kinds of things.

CBG: This was the Deep South.

REM: This was the Deep South. There were three students, they said, killed. They never ever followed and have until this day never corrected the story that there were three students, three State College students killed in the incident.

CBG: Did other major newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* or . . .

REM: They all picked it up and carried it in a syndicated . . .

CBG: From the *Los Angeles Times*.

REM: . . . yes, a syndicated column-type of thing.

CBG: Yes.

REM: And it really became a very difficult thing to overcome for South Carolina, and it gave us--that was sort of the official, in-depth documentary that came out of that. The only thing I ever heard from Jack or Nelson, either of the Jacks, was when they determined to write their book. They came to me and asked if I would write the final chapter of the book, that they would allow me to do that. I declined to do it because, number one, I wasn't going to participate in it; number two, I wasn't going to dignify it; and number three, if I ever wanted really to talk about Orangeburg in depth, I'd do it in a different fashion than I would in a book like that.

CBG: Were you in office at that time?

REM: Yes.

CBG: So this would have had the . . .

REM: This would have had the . . .

CBG: . . . would have been an official communication.

REM: It would have been an official communication, and it would have really added, I'm sure, great credibility to that book and would have put me in a position of just writing a final chapter and taking issue. I suppose in their minds it was a pretty generous thing on their part to do.

CBG: Well, in the end result then, how would you assess the management of Cleveland Sellers and his predicament?

REM: Well, I think what we determined really was that it needed to be disposed of in an ordinary course. Charges had been brought against him, he'd been indicted by a grand jury, and it just needed to be handled just like you would any other trial of that nature, and it shouldn't be dismissed and dropped as we had dropped so many of the civil rights charges around the state against the students for demonstrating and things of that nature. We didn't want to try them. This was different, and we should pursue it and proceed with it and were determined to do it. Fortunately, the trial went without incident, and, fortunately, the jury was bi-racial. There were three blacks on the jury, and they convicted Cleveland Sellers, you recall, and Cleveland Sellers was sentenced and appealed and served his time in the state penitentiary.

I think it made Cleveland Sellers very bitter, but my feeling was that he had chosen his course of action and that, if there was any one person that was really responsible for the deaths of those three kids down there, it was Cleveland Sellers, more than anybody else, because they wouldn't have been there had it not been for him. They wouldn't have been out there agitating and trying to burn a house down had it not been for him, and they wouldn't have thrown stuff at the policemen had it not been for him. So when you come to the bottom line, he incited the riot and, therefore, should pay something for it to tell other people that you just don't do that. We didn't know Lamar was going to happen at the time. We didn't contemplate Lamar, but at the same time, it set a precedent so that when Lamar came along and school buses were turned over, Gerald Best was indicted over there. My position was the same, that we were just not going to tolerate these kinds of things. We hadn't before, and the courts were the place to punish people, not out on the

streets, not some place else. So as it turned out, we could say we prosecuted Cleveland Sellers in Orangeburg, and we're going to prosecute Gerald Best in Darlington County.

CBG: Did you ever hear what happened to Cleveland Sellers in years that followed?

REM: No. The last I heard he had mellowed and had, like so many of the others at that time, had sort of gotten back into society and may have been teaching or lecturing somewhere. I've forgotten. I followed it and was interested and curious and had said one time, by reason of an inquiry from somebody that I'd have no problem with seeing Cleveland Sellers. In fact, it might be interesting to have an opportunity to sit down and talk with him. You know, I was always fascinated by what made you get into that. I could understand, as I said, I could understand young black students. I may have said one time, "If I were one of them, I'd probably be agitating. I'd be pushing because I'd be impatient, too," but I never could understand why Cleveland Sellers would want to--intelligent, bright, articulate, supposedly well educated--do what he did and would want to get into that part of it rather than into the part of persuasion, of talking and trying to resolve it that way.

CBG: What about changes at South Carolina State College? I know we talked about some that were contemplated before these events. What went on after 1968?

REM: Well, the good thing about it is that positive things took place rather than negative things. There was a positive attitude in Columbia, a more positive attitude in the community, a realization that the community and the college had to really begin to come to grips with some of the community-college relations problems, and a realization in Columbia that, if we're going to have a State College, we had to really do something for it. I think we alluded to the fact that, shortly after the incident, there were strong moves to close the college. There were strong moves to move it out of Orangeburg. We never really gave any thought to that, but there were strong moves from Orangeburg and from the public and others to close it down. "We don't need it anymore. We don't need a black college, get it out of Orangeburg, move it to Florence or Sumter or someplace where there would be a better environment for it."

We totally disregarded all of that and said, no, we need to just get on with building the institution, and we had a very positive attitude in the legislature and all governmental circles except for a few Republicans. "Let's go on and do something with it. Let's make it a good institution. Let's provide a quality education. Let's take away that argument that it's a second class school, the quality of education is not there, and let's get out of some of the things it's in that it ought not to be in. Let's finalize the closing of the agriculture school." It wasn't really a college of agriculture; it was sort of a stigma around its neck in the

minds of most of the people there. "Let's beef up the real programs." We felt then that it was turning out a lot of teachers, a lot of people in teaching and the arts and sciences area, and we needed to beef those up and provide more funds, provide better facilities.

Of course all of that was in the process. Those buildings were already--we had just built, I think, three new buildings and given them money for new dormitories and all. The building that's named for the three students was to be named Jim Smith, who's Pat Smith's uncle who was the head of the Budget and Control Board. Jim Smith had been, surprisingly, a strong supporter of the school, had always looked out for it with some money and all of that and had been instrumental in helping us put together the funding for the facilities and all. So we were going to name one of those buildings for him. When this came along, I'm not sure whether it was Maceo Nance or who it was, said to me, "You know, this will just--this is bad. We've agreed to do it, but it'll add fuel." So we withdrew the name and let them name the building for the three students who'd been killed there because we felt that, after all, that was a symbolic thing to them, and it was something that was deep seated emotionally, and anything we could do to remove that emotional side of it was worth doing.

CBG: Did the prospect of continued demonstrations to what happened sidetrack this positive approach?

REM: Not a great deal. We had them as you recall. There was, oh, gosh, just an outpouring from the colleges here, Benedict and Allen, and then the march on Columbia by the students from down there; and my recollection is we helped them get buses to come so they could come in an orderly way . . .

CBG: Yes.

REM: . . . and could return in an orderly way and made it easy for them to come on up and express themselves. But that's where we had the big thing on the State House grounds where they were demanding that the governor come out and confront them. They came for a confrontation. I just clearly enunciated that the governor didn't have confrontations with anybody, but he would have conferences with any group, anybody, and just stayed very firm in that and said, "If you'll send a committee, get together and designate a committee of not more than twelve, I'd be glad to see them in my office." We through hours and hours finally accomplished that. That's where the group came in and we talked for a long time in the governor's office.

Prior to that, I had had meetings with the Benedict and Allen student bodies. I'd had a meeting with the presidents of the two student bodies and a committee from the two campuses. From that came one of the first--well, not one of the first--but one of the early black Law Enforcement Division officers. I remember in

that conversation there was a fellow, Wilmont Shaw, who was president of the student body at Allen. He got pretty pretty strong with me in the conversations about blacks and employment and really got into the fact that SLED and other law enforcement--I was saying, "We've been looking, we've been trying, and the problem you don't realize is that we have difficulty in recruiting qualified blacks because they don't want it." I said, "Most blacks and you sitting here don't want to work for SLED. You talk about it, but we've recruited only one or two." We recruited one State College student, who had been cut by the pros, and he was worth all kinds because he worked the campus for us, and we had two or three and we used them, but we couldn't use them always in black problems because it wasn't fair to them, and they were not good for us a lot of times in those kinds of dangerous situations.

Afterwards I had Wayne Seal call Wilmont Shaw back. I said, "How about getting him back in here?" and I said, "You know, you just got on me pretty hard about this. Do you want to go to work for SLED?" He was a chemistry major and he looked at me, and he wasn't sure about it, but I had him boxed. He ended up going to work for SLED and became a very close friend. Unfortunately, he got into trouble. He got all messed up financially and messed up with another woman, but anyway Wilmont Shaw got one of the early jobs with SLED. He was good. He was real good. His problems later were isolated problems caused by personal stuff rather than--but we had all those meetings with students from other black colleges, and I thought defused it pretty quickly.

It didn't last long. It calmed itself down. They went on back to school. There was a very positive move to improve the quality, improve the facilities. My feeling was that you can't see quality improve, but you can see the buildings improve. You can see the painting and the cleaning and all of that on the campus. So we decided we needed to do some things that people could see, and we did that as well as the quality, and that's when the community and the school began to work together, and the biracial groups began to go around the state to try to be sure we didn't have another Orangeburg. Fortunately, we didn't have another State College someplace else. We talked earlier about most of these incidents occurring where there was a college, Voorhees in Denmark. We never had any problem with Morris College.

CBG: Did it . . . ?

REM: We never really had any problems with Benedict and Allen other than they were always involved in the demonstrations, naturally, because they were a bunch of young people, easy to get into a group.

CBG: Did you ever have any fear of subsequent events repeating?

REM: We frankly were shocked that we had Orangeburg because we thought that we had things in this state under better control. We thought we had better communications than they had in the other Southern states. We thought we had a stronger black leadership than they had in other states, and thus we really never contemplated an Orangeburg. After that, I think we realized it could happen, but at the same time we probably were, you know, a little more sensitive to not letting something get that far. On the other hand, we had Voorhees, and that blew up in my face. I didn't even know anything about it, didn't even know they had problems down there. It was a private, church-supported school. We were very cautious and very careful to be on even greater alert and always to involve more people, if you could, into those things.

CBG: On the surface, the Voorhees thing was really even more explosive, particularly with the display of weapons and all that.

REM: Yes, that was probably the shocker of the whole time, and nobody talks much about Voorhees. It was the most delicate problem we had to handle during that period of time, too, because it was a private, church-supported institution and created some real problems for us as to what our responsibility was.

CBG: Maybe it even raised a lot of specters, too, because it's in the same neck of the woods.

REM: Right, Orangeburg's next door really.

CBG: Yes. A prime candidate for spillover problems.

REM: But I think, you know, following Orangeburg, without being misunderstood, there was a reluctance on the part of the Orangeburg students to get involved in anything else. They didn't want any part of Voorhees.

CBG: Yes.

REM: They weren't going to get drawn into it. They weren't going to be caught up in it. It almost was, "That's your problem."

CBG: Yes.

REM: Attitude. And again, it was in a smaller place, a smaller school, and probably was more isolated and just easier to calm it than it would have been in Orangeburg.

CBG: What about the families of the individuals who were killed at Orangeburg? Was there ever any civil action on their part?

REM: No, there never was. There was some talk about it, but there never was any action on their part.

CBG: Was there contact?

REM: There was some contact, yes, with them. I recall speaking at the Masonic lodge here on Gervais Street for a Reverend Lewis, you recall, who was very active at that time and all and was an activist. I recall coming there at his invitation to speak to the whole group, and in there were one or two or maybe all three families. It was a right sensitive experience, but I took it, went in, and spoke to them, and I really opted to deal with the positive side of South Carolina. Something like that was something that had happened. It was unfortunate. We all regretted that it happened, but what we had to do was to be sure it didn't happen again, something like that, and the only way for us to avoid it is to recognize that we all had to work together and had to communicate. We could express ourselves, but there just shouldn't come a time when we had to have confrontations.

So there was an overt effort on everybody's part to try to do anything we could to recognize that it was a sad time. We had had a crisis, but we had to pick up the pieces and move forward, and to take the positive side was much better than trying to explain it away, deal with it, discuss it, talk with it, and just keep it as a flaming cancer that we couldn't do anything about.

CBG: Was that event, that is, the Masonic hall speech, about the end of it, do you think?

REM: Sort of along about that time. I'm a little hazy on the time, but it was along about then.

CBG: Yes. Would that have been, let's say, the public event that for all intents and purposes established a new platform from which to proceed?

REM: Right.

CBG: Do you have any general reflections or general thoughts at this point about Orangeburg, ideas that may not have been said or some feelings?

REM: You know, you think about it and you try to second guess yourself, you know, really, you try to hindsight and second guess, and I don't know whether it's unfortunate or fortunate that I really can't. I really think Orangeburg was--you know, there were things like that happening, we were so fortunate not to have anything more than Orangeburg in South Carolina. If we'd known about the bowling alley, I keep coming back to that. If we'd known about the bowling alley we may have avoided the whole thing. On the other hand, there may have been something else. There may have been another little isolated thing, sore, down there somewhere that would have festered and caused an eruption because it was a place where probably something was going to happen. Community and school relations were not what they ought to be. The school was not what it ought to be. There was unrest. So it may have happened anyway. About all we can say is if we'd just known about the bowling alley and perhaps could have had an opportunity to deal with that, we may have avoided it.

END OF TAPE